The Quilt of the Letter: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

KAI-LING LIU

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
National Cheng Kung University
Tainan Taiwan R. O. C.

Reprinted from Proceedings of the National Science Council
Part C: Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 622-629, October 1999
National Science Council
Taipei, Taiwan
Republic of China
The Quilt of the Letter:
Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

**KAI-LING LIU**

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature  
National Cheng Kung University  
Tainan Taiwan R. O. C.

(Received May 15, 1997; Accepted December 9, 1998)

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how the epistolary quilt manifests Celie’s self-realization. Patriarchy deprives Celie of her voice, separates the two sisters, and interrupts their communication. Nevertheless, Celie speaks through her writing. Her dependence on God in the absence of Nettie initiates her writing. Celie is separated from Nettie due to the oppressive Pa and Mr. ___ but because of this separation, Celie’s domestic world is able to expand to a global sphere. Patriarchy is reversed when Celie replaces God with Nettie. From that point on, Celie speaks in her own voice without the agency of God. Female bonding becomes rudimentary in the reversal of male authority and as Celie’s construction of her self. In addition to her sisterhood with Nettie, Celie’s alliance with Sofia marks her first step away from patriarchal influence. Most of all, Shug, as Celie’s friend, sister, and lover, initiates Celie onto understanding and appreciation of the female body. Also, Shug mediates between Celie and Nettie as well as between Celie and Mr. ___ At the end of the novel, all (black) women and men related to Celie are reunited as a family and many have learned to realize and respect the strength of women. The final epistolary quilting manifests itself in Celie’s last letter, which echoes Walker’s non-separatist, womenist concerns.

**Keywords:** enclosure, female bonding, feminism, letter writing, patriarchy, womenist

---

I. Prologue

In *The Color Purple*, quilt-making and letter-writing are significant in the sense that they both work to piece together Celie’s fragmentary world. Alice Walker herself, as pointed out by Lindsey Tucker, draws the analogy between her writing of *The Color Purple* and quilt-making: after she bought some fabric and obtained a quilt pattern from her mother, her quilt “began to grow. And of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other” (Walker, 1983: 358; Tucker, 1988: 88). Furthermore, M. Teresa Tavormina remarks that from “individual pieces of clothing and individual letters to quilts and life-time correspondence, the creative human spirit fashions meaning from the otherwise scattered elements of life” (1986: 226). Recognizing the subversive power of quilting/writing, Walker’s critics, such as Tavormina and Tucker, investigate how Celie develops herself from oppressive patriarchal power through sisterhood.

This paper will also examine how the epistolary quilt manifests Celie’s self-realization; however, this paper will first highlight the role of patriarchy and then along the discussion of the second and the third parts will point out the paradox of patriarchy as it triggers and at the same time interrupts female bonding. The second part will elaborate upon the embodiment of female bonding by the quilting. Thirdly, quilting by Celie’s writing to and receiving letters from Nettie will be analyzed. The conclusion will explain the function of the epistolary quilt in relation to Alice Walker’s womenist ideal(is).

II. The Role of Patriarchy

In the beginning of *The Color Purple*, Celie’s self-enclosure, the patriarchal enclosure, and the epistolary enclosure overlap each other. Celie’s first letter to God is preceded by a threatening voice: “You better not never tell nobody but God. I’d kill your mummy” (Walker, 1982: 1). This speaking person, as we learn later, is Celie’s stepfather who menaces her so as to keep hidden his sexual abuse of her. By demanding that Celie confide only in
The Quilt of the Letter: The Color Purple

God. Pa, as Celie calls her stepfather, deprives Celie of her voice. Since Pa knows that God will not respond, with the form of the letter that Celie uses to disclose herself, Pa confines Celie to an epistolary enclosure. Ostensibly, Pa directs Celie’s letters toward a destination, but he assigns this destination because he knows that the letter will never be able to reach that destination. Even though Pa hardly intercepts Celie’s letters in reality, he symbolically intercepts them by making them undeliverable (to God), inaccessible and thus unreadable to the addressee. From the very beginning of the novel, consequently, patriarchy manifests itself in the ability to control both female voice and female text. By assigning God to be Celie’s only confidant and intimating Celie with the life of her mother, Pa directs Celie to submerge herself in the patriarchal “law of the father.” Celie’s identification with the patriarchal law in turn prompts her to define herself in patriarchal terms.

Initially, Celie’s confidence in God helps her construct a self in the written word. God is the most essential symbol of patriarchy and a “passive confidant,” who, according to Altman,

listens to confessions, [who] listens to stories. Often at the beginning of letter narrative he has the vital function of triggering the exposition. What he hears is an account of past events; this narrative-connected role […] continues throughout the text to be part of the epistolary confidant’s raison d’être. Absent by definition, he cannot witness the events to which the dramatic confidant is most often third party: they must be told to him. (1982: 50-51)

Celie’s first letter to God begins with: “I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). If, as Wendy Wall suggests, by eliminating the present tense of the verb and replacing it with the past, Celie seeks “to recover that ‘goodness’ that would allow her to state her existence without the mark of erasure” (84), in her confusion of herself after she is raped by Pa, Celie takes the patriarchally prescribed “goodness” to be a universal moral and she must live up to that “goodness” so as to remain alive. While Celie is first pushed away from her mother because Pa physically holds her mother for his own use, she is further detached from her mother because she cannot even speak to her mother about the “truth” of a “good girl.” Ironically, Celie must resort to a male God, instead of her mother, to undo what Pa has done to her. Here, what Celie asks God to answer is about the female body—her change due to her pregnancy, the question that she is forbidden to ask her mother because of her illegitimate position. While her body betrays her by “speaking out!” her relationship with man and thus increases her isolation from her mother and the “public”—she is withdrawn from school by Pa on the excuse of her pregnancy, to Celie, the appearance remains on the outside and she is silent about the outside. In one letter, Celie speaks to God about her body:

I’m big. I can’t move fast enough. By time I get back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time […] She [Celie’s mother] ask me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say. When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fast you could have knock me over with feather. (3)

This written description reveals Celie as a lonely woman in her puzzlement about what is happening to her. This is a monologic letter, written only because of the writer’s trust in her confidant, revealing the reality in Celie’s own terms. With her confidence in God, Celie is able to separate “a suppressed ‘self’ through her letters, divorcing herself into radically different public and private beings” (Wall, 1988: 85). It will not be until Celie finds alliance with other women that she begins to break the boundary between the inside and the outside and to transform epistolary enclosure to epistolary expansion.

Celie’s isolation from social relations generates her further trust in God. When she sees that Pa casts his eyes upon Nettie, she says to Nettie, “I’ll take care of you. With God help” (4). To soothe Nettie’s worries when she is forced by Mr. ______ to leave Celie, Celie says: “Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along” (28). This letter ends with Celie’s disappointment because, in spite of her promise, Nettie never writes. In her next letter to God, as if to cope with her frustration, Celie addresses God by spelling out the three letters separately, G-o-d. God is not only Celie’s source of spiritual strength but also her moral mentor. In the only place in Celie’s letters where the description of a church service appears, Celie writes how she works hard to struggle against the stare of “the women at church” (45):

I keep my head up, best I can. I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there’s wood for the stove in wintertime. I do call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie, he say, You faithful as the day is long. Then he talk to the other ladies and they mess. I sourry bout, doing this, doing that. Mr. ______, sit back by
the door gazing here and there. The women smile in his direction every chance they get. He never look at me or even notice. (45)

Here, Celia proves her "goodness" by doing women’s chores for God, the church. But, the irony is while she seems to be upgraded because of her religious devotion, her "sisterhood" in the church proves to be mere appearance. In essence, she is still regarded by the women at church and by Mr. as an inferior "other.

Celia is pushed by Pa toward recognizing the male law and she accepts that law as the only law. Harpo, Mr. ’s son, seeks Celia’s advice to "make Sofia [his wife] mind" (37). Celia says: "Beat her" (38). This advice exactly echoes Mr. ’s advice to Harpo: "Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (37). Although Celia explains to Sofia that her advice to Harpo comes from her jealousy of Sofia for she is able to do what Celia cannot do—to fight (42), Celia’s attachment to the male law is still evident because her advice to Harpo comes right after Mr. ’s. Since she is able to record Mr. ’s advice, she must be present so that she knows this advice. Then, when Harpo asks for her advice, she just passes the words from a male model. On being asked by Sofia what she does when she gets mad, Celia reveals how religion helps her to stay alive:

I used to get mad at my mamma cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. [ . . . ] Well, sometimes Mr. got on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband, I shurg my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways. (43-44)

Celia’s passivity in the “male network of power relations,” as Carolyn Williams calls it (1989: 275), is best reflected in this “to-stay-alive” philosophy of life. Celia, following the religious creeds, sets her eyes on the heavenly world, does her duty as required, and deaden herself to her surroundings so as to endure the suffering in this world. Celia tells how she confronts Mr. ’s beating: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celia, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man" (23). Not only does Celia make herself as unresponsive as a tree, but she makes herself a shadow doing duties without feelings: "Everybody say how good I is to Mr. ’s children. I be good to them. But I don’t feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like putting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chiffrobe" (31). Celia does not fight, because from her experience she knows that fighting is useless: "I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive.” (22)

The dichotomy between appearance/outside and reality/inside recurs here. While superficially Celia remains alive, emotionally she is dead.

The ambiguity of language is also visible between "lies" and truth. Pa wants to persuade Mr. into marrying Celia instead of Nettie and thus describes Celia in the following way: “She ugly, [ . . . ] But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either, and I’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man, [ . . . ] And another thing—she tell lies” (9). Supposedly, Pa is telling the truth, emphasizing the reliability of his words by adding extra to what he is supposed to reveal—Celia is dishonest. In fact, the authenticity of this whole statement is controversial because its premises are false in the first place. Pa’s excuses about marrying Nettie are:

She too young. Don’t know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to get some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celia. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh no, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He [Pa] spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already. (9)

Superficially, Pa wants to protect Nettie and to marry off Celia for her own sake. But Celia was only fourteen when Pa raped her. At that time she did not even know what was done to her, not to mention discern the validity of what she was told to her by Pa after the rape, that her telling of what Pa had done to her would kill her mother—the biggest he told by Pa which doubles Celia’s oppression. The “schooling” that Pa wants to get for Nettie is actually the “schooling” he has given Celia. He prompts Mr. to marry Celia because what Mr. needs is a woman who can cook and look after children, those being the things that Pa’s “young” and “fresh” wife cannot accomplish. But, the “youth” and “freshness” is what makes Pa want to own Celia. Pa’s “lies” are covered up by his “truth-telling” and Celia is traded like goods, “circulated in place of words, [as] objects signified.” (Tucker, 1988: 84).

To release herself from the patriarchal enclosure, the first step for Celia is to discern between “lies” and “truth.”
Getting the upper hand in her fight with Harpo, Sofia goes on to question Celie as to why she has advised Harpo to beat her:

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.
No I didn’t, I said.
Don’t lie, she said.
I didn’t mean it, I said.
Then what you say it for? she as.

[...]
I say it cause I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t.
What that? She say.
Fight, I say (42)

Linda S. Kauffman observes that the “scene where Sophia confronts her [Celie] marks the beginning of Celie’s transformation, for she must confront her own rage” (1992: 198). To extend this observation, we may say that when questioned by Sofia face to face, Celie is forced to examine her thoughts and is subsequently enabled to separate the appearance of words—to beat Sofia, from their real meaning—to strike down a self that is scared to fight. Symbolically, Sofia initiates Celie into the recognition of her inside and outside.

III. Quilting and the Female Bonding

Quilting embodies female bonding in *The Color Purple*. It is not only that the quilt that the women make is called “Sister’s Choice,” but what entails this quilt-making is the mutual understanding between two women—Celite and Sofia. After she compromissed with Celie, Sofia suggests: “Let’s make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains” (44). Those curtains are the ones that Harpo asks Celie to make for the new house of Harpo and Sofia. If Sofia’s tearing those curtains into pieces is a sign of protest against Celie, her offer to make quilt pieces out of those broken curtains represents a collaboration of female understanding. Additionally, Shug contributes to this quilting by giving “her old yellow dress for scrap” (61). Later on, Celie intends to give the quilt to Shug but at the last moment gives it to Sofia on Sofia’s separation from Harpo, and hence her separation from Celie. As a result, this quilt stands for an extension of female bondage. This quilt also extends to connect Celie with Nettie and Corrine. Nettie proves her innocence from any intimate relationship with Samuel by reminding Corrine of Celie with the quilt that Corrine makes with pieces of the cloth which she bought on the day she encountered Celie. By the end of the novel, Mr. __________ learns to make quilts while he and Celie are engaged in “idle conversation” (291).

Celite’s relation to Sofia has been discussed previously, and before we analyze Celie’s relation to Shug, it is worth while to compare Shug with Sofia. In her next to the last letter to Nettie, Celie writes how she and Mr. __________ look at Shug and Sofia:

He says to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men. I [Mr. __________] mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what.

[...]
Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either.
You mean they not like you or me.
They hold they own, he say. And it’s different. (276)

To Mr. __________, daring to be oneself is what makes Shug and Sofia masculine and what makes them “not like women.” And their being women biologically makes their masculinity questionable. To Celie, however, though both Sofia and Shug fight, Sofia tends to be more masculine than Shug. According to Celie’s description, Sofia is “big, strong, and healthy” (33), must fight “in a family of men” (42) and prefers being “out in the fields or fooling with the animals, [e]ven chopping wood” (63). She fights physically, and verbally, with Harpo and the mayor’s wife. In this perspective, Mae G. Henderson contends that “Sofia [sic] becomes, for Celie, a model resistance to sexual and, later, racial subjugation” (1985: 15). This is only half true, because Sofia’s physical resistance merely leads to her disfigurement and her imprisonment. When Celie asks her how she manages to survive, Sofia replies: “Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (93). In other words, Sofia ends up staying alive in Celie’s way. Paralleling Celie’s with Sofia’s development, Alice Walker seems to point out that going the masculine way, as how Sofia has behaved, would not work to resist sexual and racial discrimination.

Shug is the real catalyst for Celie’s breakthrough of her self-enclosure, as well as of the patriarchal and epistolarity enclosure. Celie first sees Shug in the picture dropped by Mr. __________ and immediately Shug impresses Celie as a woman: “Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin’ tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some” (7). On her wedding night Celie puts her arm around Mr. __________, imaging that this is what
Shug would like to do when Mr. ____ is on top of her (13). On sensing that Mr. ____ is taking Shug home, Celic becomes, for the first time in her narrative, fussy about her appearance: "My heart begin to beat like fury, and the first thing I try to do is change my dress" (46). Though a mother of two children and wife of Mr. ___, Celic is "still a virgin" (81) when she meets Shug. After she has developed a bonding solid enough for Shug to stay so as to ensure that Mr. ____ will not beat her again, Shug teaches Celic the "finger and tongue" work (81). Previously, Celic was distant (and distances herself) from her own body because of patriarchal intervention. With Shug, she confirms and feels the need of it. After Shug's teaching, when she hears Shug and Mr. ____ together, all she "can do is pull the quilt over [her] head and finger [her] little button and titties and cry" (83). In this way, female bonding promotes female sexuality, which in turn enhances female bonding of motherhood and sisterhood. After Shug makes love with her, Celic "feels something real soft and wet on [her] breast, feel like one of [her] little lost babies mouth" (118). Sleeping with Shug feels like sleeping with "mama" and "Nettie" (119). Celic once confesses: "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. ____maybe, but start up again with Shug" (85). If this is so, Celic's relationship with Shug gives her vain "to-stay-alone" philosophy a substantial life.

As Celic comes to a better understanding of her self/body, she is able to step out of the self-confinement and step further away from the patriarchal enclosure. Shug challenges God as Celic's confidant by causing Celic to tell her what she has told no one but God—Pa's rape. Celic used to hold back her tears and try to make herself a "tree" in the face of oppression; with Shug, Celic cries after telling the story. Shug appears as the first person that Celic confides in. Formally, God is still the addressee, but not the only one now. With her confidence in Shug, Celic in reality has juxtaposed humanity with divinity as well as a female with a male. Shug actually helps Celic break the epistolary enclosure by discovering Nettie's letters, which have been intercepted by Mr. ____. The displacement of divinity with humanity becomes even more apparent when, after knowing her real parentage from Nettie's letter, Celic degrades God to be a "man", who acts "just like all the other men [she] know. Trotting, forgetful and lowdown" (199). More than merely helping Celic deconstruct God, Shug helps her reconstruct God: "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (202); "It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything" (202). As Linda S. Kaufman remarks, Celic "reconstructs divinity, under Shug's guidance, as the principle of creation and love in the universe" (1992: 209).

What Shug ultimately helps Celic discover is her self and her confidence in herself.

Celic's beginning of a new life, a new history, starts with her physical break out of the patriarchal confinement. On learning Celic's real parentage, Shug requests that Celic go with her to Tennessee (183). Before that, they go back to see Pa so as to seek the tombs of Celic's mother and her real father. Significantly, Celic writes her first letter to Nettie about the visit to the past and thus makes her letters to Nettie a beginning of a new history. As Celic determines to leave Mr. ____, she dares to talk back to him:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.
Say what? he ask. Shock.
All around the table folks mouths be dropping open.
You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world.
Mr. ____ start to spatter. ButButButButBut. Sound like some kind of motor.
But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say.
And when she do, all us together gon whip your ass.

(207)

Originally, the spoken word is used by Pa to suppress Celic so that Celic must resort to writing to find a voice. It is used by Mr. ____ to command Celic, who jumps every time when Mr. ____ calls her. Here, Celic claims her autonomy by manifesting her speaking voice. She not only verbally overpowers Mr. ____ but also figuratively replaces his "dead body" with a propheted, reunited body of Celic's family. Later, Mr. ____ tries to deknit Celic with his words: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman, Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (213). Celic just literally corrects him: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listenin'. But I'm here" (214). The last sentence no longer represents a passive attitude toward life but an assertion of self. Eventually, Mr. ____ becomes "somebody [Celic] can talk to" (283). As it happens, Celic by the end of the novel has turned out to be a speaking subject.\textsuperscript{45}

From this discussion, Shug plays an important role of a mediator. Again, to use the term of quilting. Shug is the interlining, given that the "demands made of an interlining are that it be soft, warm, and easy to sew through" (Orlofsky & Myron, 1974: 113). Celic describes how it feels sleeping with Shug: "It warm and cushiony" (119). Shug acts as a medium between Celic and Celic's self, between Celic and Albert, and between Celic and Nettie as a postal mechanism who resumes the circulation of the letters.
IV. Quilting and Letter-Writing

Though blood sisters, Cettie and Nettie are very different from each other in personality. Cettie is ignorant, learns from experience, enjoys needlework and cooking, and is always associated with the image of the house, while Nettie is intellectual, learns from books, enjoys reading and teaching, and is always associated with the image of the world. Cettie is not only ignorant of her own body but also slow in learning. Nettie tries hard to teach Cettie about the discoverer of America, Columbus, and to tell her that the earth is not flat, but Cettie’s response is “look like he [Columbus] the first thing I forgot” (10) and “I never tell her how flat it look to me” (11). Cettie also remembers:

Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know. No matter what happen, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. And she a good teacher too. It nearly kill me to think she might marry somebody else Mr. ____ or wind up in some white lady kitchen. All day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting, and try to get us to think. Most days I feel too tired to think. (17)

As Cettie is so attached to the feminine domain of the house that she seems to be incapable of formal education, Nettie is so devoted to the masculine intellectual world of books that she seems to be distanced from the everyday routine of house chores.

In an epistolary quilt, the “blank space between letters shapes his [the epistolary novelist’s] narrative as well as the letters themselves, making the question of ellipsis in epistolary writing a much more complex one than in other narrative” (Altman, 1982: 182). Here, patriarchy is the cause of the “blank space” between the letters, which discontinues/misdirects the circulation of the letters while at the same time unites the letters.

Enraged by Nettie’s fighting against him, Mr. __________ forces Nettie to leave and, at her departure, warns Nettie that “because of what [she’d] done [she’d] never hear from [Cettie] again, and [Cettie] would never hear from [her]” (131). This male voice of premonition echoes Pa’s threatening one in the beginning of the novel. As first God stands between Cettie and Nettie, now Mr. __________ stands between the two sisters. However, ironically, the patriarchal interruption just catalyzes women’s writing, as Nettie later tells Cettie what keeps her writing:

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God; you had to write, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them, which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don’t write to you I feel so sad as I do when I don’t pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. (136)

Also, this patriarchal interception is displaced by female bonding as Shug later acts as a postal mechanism to deliver and thus to open the channels of the sisters’ epistolary communication.

In consequence, female bonding, patriarchy, and the circulation of the letter are much interrelated. Cettie would not write her letters to God if Pa did not metaphorically “intercept” her “letter” to reveal his misbehavior. Cettie would not continue her letters to God if Nettie’s letters were not intercepted, and Nettie might not complete the life-long “correspondence” if she were not forewarned by Mr. __________ about his going to disrupt the communication between the sisters. Then, Cettie’s intimacy with Shug intercepts Mr. __________’s interception of Nettie’s letters, which is made possible by Shug’s intimacy with Mr. __________.

When Nettie’s letters first reach Cettie, Cettie encloses these letters in her letters to God. This is how Nettie’s letter first appears before us:

Dear God,

This the letter I been holding in my hand.

Dear Cettie, [ . . . ] (122).

The next of Nettie’s letters does not appear until after Cettie writes two other letters to God: “Dear Cettie, the first letter say” (131). The beginning of the following letters reads in this way:

Nettie’s third letter: Next one said.

Dear Cettie, (133)

Nettie’s fourth letter: Next one say.

Dear Cettie, (134)

Nettie’s fifth letter: Next one, fai, dated two months later, say.

Dear Cettie, (140)

Nettie’s sixth letter: The next letter after that one say.

Dear Cettie, (140)

Even though Cettie does not address God in these letters, she still speaks to God and shows him Nettie’s letters (the italics) as if she wanted to secure them, with God’s help, from being further intercepted.

The following two letters are Nettie’s, without Cettie’s italic speech to God. But this direct presentation of Nettie’s letters indicates Cettie’s gradual empowerment by receiv-
Alice Walker introduces “womanism” to the terminology of feminist criticism. Walker gives four definitions of “womanist.” The first definition evolves from the black folk expression “womanish” as opposed to “girlish” (xv). While being “girlish” means “trifling, irresponsible, not serious,” being “womanish” involves an interest in “grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up” (xv). Most of all, a “womanist” is a “black feminist or feminist of color” (xv). The emphasis on “black” and “color” does not entail a separatism, as Walker articulates in the second definition of “womanism.” “Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist” (xv). The third definition concerns the “womanist” attitude toward life: “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (xv). Lastly, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (xv). This explication of “womanism” can serve as a footnote to The Color Purple.

Patriarchy deprives Celie of her voice, separates the two sisters, and interrupts their communication. Nevertheless, Celie speaks through her writing. Her dependence on God in the absence of Nettie initiates her writing. Celie is separated from Nettie due to the oppressive Pa and Mr. ______, but because of this separation, Celie’s domestic world is able to expand to a global sphere. Patriarchy is revenged when Celie replaces God with Nettie. From that point on, Celie speaks in her own voice without the agency of God. Female bonding becomes rudimentary to the reversal of male authority and in Celie’s construction of her self. In addition to her sisterhood with Nettie, Celie’s alliance with Sofia marks her first step away from patriarchal influence. Most of all, Sing, as Celie’s friend, sister, and lover, initiates Celie into understanding and appreciating the female body. Also, Shug mediates between Celie and Nettie as well as between Celie and Mr. ______.

At the end of the novel, all (black) women and men related to Celie are reunited as a family and men have learned to realize and respect the strength of women. The final epistolary quitting manifests itself in Celie’s last letter: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292), which echoes Walker’s non-separatist, womanist concerns.

Notes


2. I am revising Alixman’s statement that “a change in correspondents can often signal an important moment in the epistolary hero’s development” (1982: 54).
References


書信百衲被：
愛莉絲・華克的《紫色姐妹花》

劉開銘

國立成功大學外文系

摘 要

本文藉由分析《紫色姐妹花》中「書信百衲被」的運用來探究書中女主角自我實現的過程。父權在本書中既壓制了女性情操的展現，也阻礙了她們的書信交流，但也催化了女性情操。由於蘇菲亞的愛慕，希利得以初步突破父權的限制。由於蘇菲亞的引誘，希利一方面得以展現自我的限制，另一方面也得以和希利遠離，進而突破父權書信的限制，以希利取代父權象徵的上帝為受信人。激發創造性的女性書信百衲被，把希利破碎的居家生活縫補起來，是小說最後由於受信人稱的希利萬象，呈現出一個女性主義的烏托邦：男人和女人、女人和女人、人與神互生其長。

關鍵詞：限制、女性情操、女性主義、書信、父權、女人主義